

DNR rejects plan for St. John's Bayou

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By Marc Powers ~ *Southeast Missourian*

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. -- State officials declined to approve the \$85 million St. John's Bayou and New Madrid Floodway project on Monday over concern that the two federal agencies involved in the project disagree on its environmental impact.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has spent years working on the project to mitigate periodic flooding in Mississippi, New Madrid and Scott counties. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service opposes the plan, claiming it would eliminate 18,000 acres of wetlands in the Mississippi River floodplain and damage the ecological integrity of Big Oak Tree State Park, a federally designated natural landmark.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources, citing the dispute between the federal agencies, refused to issue a water quality certification for the project.

Scott Toten, director of DNR's water protection and soil conservation division, said the corps can re-apply once issues are resolved.

"One of the things we stated through our review of this project was to make sure the federal agencies were on the same page," Toten said.

The corps may also appeal to the Missouri Clean Water Commission. Lloyd Smith, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, said that was the likely next step. Emerson, R-Cape Girardeau, is a long-time booster of the project.

"The commission has the final say; DNR does not," Smith said.

Smith said the project was first authorized in 1953 and should have been completed decades ago. He said it would control flooding in the cities of East Prairie and Sikeston as well as prevent significant economic damage to crops caused by late-season flooding in the region.

"If this were Cape Girardeau, St. Louis or Washington, D.C., everyone would be screaming to build it," Smith said. "But because it's farm country a lot of people think they can run over them. We are not going to let that happen. It is going to be

built."

Preserving Pinhook

Mayor Mary Louise Williams of the tiny Mississippi County village of Pinhook said her community desperately needs the project to stop the periodic evacuations of the town during flood season.

"It is important to Pinhook because we don't have any way out when the water comes in and closes the road," Williams said. "They have been working on this a long time, and it hasn't gotten any better."

The key components of the project include closing a 1,500-foot gap in an existing levy, adding pumping stations and deepening drainage ditches and streams in the St. John's Bayou.

On Friday, DNR officials suggested a third-party review of the scientific and technical issues dividing the federal agencies. According to DNR's letter of denial issued Monday evening, the wildlife service agreed to the review but the corps did not.

"Because of this disagreement, we cannot insure that water quality and wetlands will be protected," Toten said in the letter.

Toten further said DNR was concerned that the corps presented no enforceable plan for protecting the water quality at the 1,000-acre Big Oak Tree State Park in southern Mississippi County.

In a separate letter sent Monday, DNR director Stephen Mahfood again urged Col. Jack V. Scherer, the top engineer for the corps' Memphis, Tenn., district, to accept a third-party review "to remove the remaining obstacle to this project moving forward."

In a recent letter to DNR, however, Scherer said the project has undergone extensive scientific and public review for six years.

"We believe that any additional review would only add to the substantial cost that has already been incurred and unnecessarily further delay this much-needed

project," Scherer said.

In an October letter to DNR, Charles M. Scott of the wildlife service's Columbia office said the service has repeatedly recommend the corps develop an alternative that would minimize the environmental impact while still providing flood control and economic benefits for the affected farmers and communities.

"Despite our diligence in seeking balance for this project, the corps has chosen an alternative that provides the highest economic benefits and maximum environmental losses," Scott said. "... We are on the verge of losing another significant floodplain area of the Lower Mississippi River basin and the last of its kind in Missouri."

U.S. Sen. Kit Bond, R-Mo., pledged to keep up the pressure on the political front to bring the project to fruition.

"The people who need this flood control protection have waited too long and have made many compromises," Bond said. "They deserve the same level of protection received by the rich, urban folks, and that is why I am going to keep fighting for them."

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